Christian Ethics — OVSI Summary

Preamble

To approach Christian ethics is to enter a field structured by tensions that resist easy resolution. Unlike many modern ethical systems, which seek clarity through foundational principles or universal procedures, Christian ethics emerges from a confluence of traditions, narratives, and practices that do not collapse into a single method. It is at once philosophical and theological, rational and narrative, individual and communal. Any attempt to understand it must therefore begin not with a definition, but with a recognition of its layered and contested character.

At its broadest level, Christian ethics stands at the intersection of three major intellectual inheritances: the Greek philosophical tradition, the Jewish scriptural and communal tradition, and the distinctive claims of Christian theology concerning grace, incarnation, and redemption. Each of these contributes essential elements. Greek philosophy provides a language of virtue, reason, and teleology; Judaism offers a vision of law, covenant, and communal identity; Christianity reorients both by introducing the centrality of divine action in the transformation of human life.

This synthesis is neither seamless nor stable. The Greek emphasis on natural capacities and rational deliberation sits uneasily alongside the Christian insistence on the necessity of grace. The Jewish focus on law and communal practice intersects with, but is not identical to, the Christian understanding of the Church as the body through which divine life is mediated. These tensions are not accidental inconsistencies but constitutive features. Christian ethics does not resolve them into a unified system; it inhabits them.

The emergence of modernity intensifies these tensions. The modern project, particularly since the Enlightenment, seeks to establish ethics on a foundation independent of religious authority. It emphasizes autonomy, universality, and the capacity of human reason to determine moral norms. In doing so, it reconfigures the relationship between ethics and theology, often subordinating the latter to the former or relegating it to the private sphere.

From within this modern framework, Christian ethics appears problematic in two distinct ways. First, it is criticized for its historical failures—its association with violence, coercion, and exclusion. These critiques raise legitimate questions about whether Christian moral claims can be trusted. Second, it is seen as conceptually unnecessary: if ethical norms can be derived from reason, utility, or social consensus, then theological commitments may seem superfluous.

Yet the Christian tradition poses its own critique of modern ethics. By detaching ethics from any substantive account of the good grounded in a transcendent source, modern approaches risk reducing morality to procedure or preference. Without a shared telos, ethical reasoning may lack the depth and coherence needed to guide human life. The attempt to construct a universally valid ethics without reference to particular traditions or narratives may result in a framework that is formally consistent but substantively thin.

Postmodern thought further complicates this landscape by questioning the very possibility of stable foundations, whether theological or rational. It highlights the role of power, context, and language in shaping ethical claims, and it resists any totalizing account of truth or goodness. In this environment, both modern and premodern ethical systems are subject to critique.

Christian ethics, situated within this shifting terrain, cannot simply return to earlier forms, nor can it fully assimilate to contemporary frameworks. It must navigate between fidelity to its tradition and responsiveness to new conditions. This requires a mode of reflection that is both historically informed and critically engaged.

One way to characterize this mode is to see Christian ethics as fundamentally narrative. It is not primarily a set of abstract principles but a way of life shaped by a story—the biblical

narrative of creation, covenant, incarnation, and redemption. This narrative provides the context within which ethical questions are posed and answered. It offers not only norms but exemplars, not only commands but practices.

At the same time, this narrative is embodied in a community—the Church—which serves as the primary locus of ethical formation. The Church is not merely an institution but a social body that cultivates habits, dispositions, and forms of judgment. Through liturgy, teaching, and communal life, it shapes the moral imagination of its members. Ethics, in this sense, is inseparable from participation in a shared way of life.

This emphasis on narrative and community distinguishes Christian ethics from approaches that prioritize individual autonomy or universal procedures. It suggests that moral understanding is not achieved primarily through detached reasoning but through formation within a tradition. At the same time, it raises questions about how such a tradition can engage with others in a pluralistic context.

The challenge, then, is to articulate an ethical vision that is both particular and communicable. Christian ethics must be able to speak from within its own narrative while also engaging with broader ethical discourse. It cannot assume that its premises will be shared, yet it cannot abandon them without losing its identity.

Another defining feature of Christian ethics is its orientation toward an ultimate end that transcends immediate goals. This end is not simply the achievement of happiness or social order, but participation in the life of God. Such an end redefines the meaning of ethical action. It shifts the focus from self-realization to transformation, from control to reception, from autonomy to dependence.

This orientation introduces the concept of grace as central to ethical life. Grace is not an optional supplement to human effort but a necessary condition for attaining the true good. It does not eliminate the need for ethical action but reconfigures it. Human agency is preserved, yet it operates within a framework of gift rather than self-sufficiency.

The implications of this are far-reaching. Ethical failure is not merely a matter of incorrect judgment or lack of discipline; it is tied to a deeper disorder that requires transformation. Likewise, ethical success is not solely the result of human achievement but a participation in a reality that exceeds individual effort.

These themes—narrative, community, grace, and the redefinition of the good—provide the framework within which the subsequent analysis unfolds. They shape how Christian ethics engages its sources, interprets its history, and addresses contemporary issues.

To read this work, then, is to trace the development of an ethical tradition that is both continuous and evolving. It is to observe how enduring questions—about the nature of the good, the role of law, the place of virtue, and the necessity of grace—are refracted through different historical contexts and intellectual frameworks.

The aim is not to arrive at a final, definitive account, but to understand how these questions are posed and reposed within the Christian tradition. In doing so, one gains insight not only into Christian ethics, but into the broader challenges of moral reasoning in a world marked by diversity, uncertainty, and change.

Preface

The opening movement of the text—functionally serving as a preface through its Introduction—frames the central problem that animates the entire work: whether «Christian» and «ethics» can meaningfully belong together. This is not treated as a settled assumption but as a question that must be justified against both external critique and internal tension.

From the outside, Christianity faces a powerful indictment. Modern critics associate it with historical episodes of violence, intolerance, and institutional failure—crusades, inquisitions, religious wars, and complicity in systems of domination. Within this perspective, ethics emerges as a corrective force: a domain of rational evaluation that exposes and judges the moral failures of religion. If this critique holds, then the very phrase «Christian ethics» becomes contradictory, suggesting that ethical life must be pursued apart from, or even against, Christianity.

Yet the text quickly complicates this critique by introducing an internal objection. Within the Christian tradition itself, there is a suspicion that ethics—understood as a human capacity to determine and achieve the good—may undermine the necessity of divine grace. If ethics is something we can accomplish through our own resources, then the central Christian claim that we require God’s transforming action becomes superfluous. This concern is historically associated with the rejection of Pelagianism, the view that human beings can achieve their ultimate end without divine assistance.

These two objections pull in opposite directions. One seeks to preserve ethics by excluding Christianity; the other seeks to preserve Christianity by subordinating or redefining ethics. The task of the book is to navigate between these positions, showing

how Christian ethics can be both meaningful and distinctive without collapsing into either pole.

To do so, the text situates the problem within a broader intellectual context. It introduces Aristotle as a representative of classical ethics, emphasizing the idea that human beings have a natural end—eudaimonia—and possess within themselves the capacities needed to achieve it. Ethics, in this framework, is a matter of cultivating virtue and ordering one's life toward this end. This account highlights the autonomy and sufficiency of human nature, presenting ethics as a thoroughly human endeavor.

Christian theology affirms part of this vision while simultaneously challenging it. It agrees that human beings are oriented toward a good end, but redefines that end as communion with God—a form of life that surpasses natural capacities. This redefinition introduces the necessity of grace. Human beings cannot achieve their true end through their own efforts alone; they require a gift that enables what nature cannot accomplish. Ethics, therefore, cannot be understood purely in terms of human autonomy.

This initial contrast establishes the central dialectic that will run throughout the book: the interplay between nature and grace. It is not a simple opposition but a relationship of both continuity and transformation. Human capacities are real and significant, yet they are incomplete without divine action. Ethics, in this light, becomes a field in which human effort and divine gift are intertwined.

The preface also signals the methodological approach of the work. Rather than presenting a systematic theory, it traces the development of Christian ethics through its sources, historical transformations, and contemporary challenges. This approach reflects the conviction that ethics cannot be abstracted from the contexts in which it is practiced and understood. It must be examined as a lived tradition, shaped by narrative, community, and historical experience.

Another important theme introduced here is the question of the relationship between ethics and truth. Modern ethics often seeks to establish norms that are universally valid and independent of particular beliefs. Christian ethics, by contrast, is tied to specific theological claims about God, creation, and redemption. This raises the question of whether such a particularistic framework can contribute to broader ethical discourse.

The text does not resolve this question at the outset but frames it as a tension to be explored. Christian ethics must engage with other ethical systems while maintaining its own identity. It cannot simply translate its claims into neutral terms without losing their distinctive character, yet it must also find ways to communicate and interact within a pluralistic environment.

Finally, the preface underscores the practical significance of the inquiry. The question of how to relate Christianity and ethics is not merely theoretical; it has implications for how individuals and communities live. It shapes decisions about everyday practices as well as responses to broader social and political issues. By framing the discussion in this way, the text prepares the reader to see ethics not as an abstract discipline but as a dimension of lived experience.

What emerges from this opening is a clear sense of the stakes involved. To explore Christian ethics is to confront fundamental questions about human nature, the possibility of the good life, and the role of divine action in moral formation. It is also to engage with a tradition that is both deeply rooted and continually evolving, marked by both profound insight and significant failure.

The work proceeds, then, not by offering immediate answers, but by unfolding the conditions under which these questions can be meaningfully addressed.

Introduction

To join «Christian» and «ethics» into a single field of inquiry appears, at first glance, unstable. The modern imagination often associates Christianity with episodes of violence, coercion, and institutional failure—crusades, inquisitions, religious wars, and complicity with slavery or patriarchy. From this perspective, ethics emerges precisely as a corrective: a domain of rational, human deliberation that holds religion accountable, even judging it as morally deficient. If this critique is accepted, then ethics stands not alongside Christianity but against it, as its necessary alternative.

Yet there exists an opposing concern, less visible but equally significant. For many within the Christian tradition, ethics—understood as a human capacity to determine and pursue the good—threatens to displace the necessity of divine grace. Classical philosophy, especially Aristotle, presents ethics as a natural human achievement. Every being has an intrinsic end (telos), and human beings, properly formed, can realize their end—happiness or eudaimonia—through the cultivation of virtue. Ethics, in this view, is the art of aligning one's life with this natural end through disciplined habituation and rational reflection.

Christian theology both affirms and disrupts this account. It agrees that human beings are oriented toward a good end, but denies that they possess within themselves the sufficient resources to attain it. The ultimate end of human life is not merely happiness in a natural sense, but communion with God—a form of life that exceeds natural capacities. To claim

that we can achieve this end through our own efforts alone is, within Christian thought, the error of Pelagianism. Against this, Christianity insists on the necessity of grace: a divine gift that enables what human nature alone cannot accomplish.

This produces a fundamental tension. Ethics, as commonly understood, emphasizes autonomy, rational agency, and self-sufficiency. Christian faith emphasizes dependence, gift, and transformation beyond nature. The question, then, is not simply whether Christianity can be ethical, but whether ethics itself must be redefined when placed within a Christian framework.

The difficulty deepens when one considers the historical development of ethical thought. Ancient ethics, especially in Aristotle, is teleological and eudaimonistic: it assumes that all human action aims at a final good, and that this good provides coherence to moral life. Virtue functions as a mean between excess and deficiency, guiding desires toward their proper fulfillment. Laws and norms are intelligible because they direct us toward this shared end.

Christian thinkers inherit this framework but transform it. Figures like Augustine and Aquinas retain the language of virtue and natural law, yet reorient them toward a supernatural end. Aquinas, for instance, distinguishes between acquired virtues (developed through human effort) and infused virtues (given by God). Only the latter fully direct human beings toward their true end, which is friendship with God. Ethics, therefore, becomes inseparable from divine action; it is as much about receiving as it is about doing.

Modernity introduces a decisive break. The assumption of a shared, transcendent good begins to erode. Thinkers such as Kant and Mill seek to ground ethics in universal reason or utility, independent of theological commitments. Ethics becomes a public, rational enterprise accessible to all, while religion is relegated to the private sphere. In this framework, God may be permitted as a hypothesis, but is no longer necessary for ethical reasoning.

This shift creates both an opportunity and a crisis. On one hand, it allows for a common ethical discourse among people with diverse beliefs. On the other, it risks dissolving the very notion of a shared good, leading to fragmentation or even nihilism. Without a common telos, ethics may lose its grounding, becoming either a matter of subjective preference or social convention.

Christian ethics, as this book presents it, emerges within this complex landscape. It is neither simply identical with ancient virtue ethics nor reducible to modern moral philosophy. It is rooted in a narrative—the biblical story of creation, covenant, and redemption—and in a community, the Church, which embodies and transmits this

narrative. Its primary sources are not abstract principles but practices, traditions, and forms of life shaped by Scripture and sustained through worship and sacrament.

At the same time, Christian ethics cannot ignore the broader ethical traditions with which it is entangled. It must engage Greek philosophy, Jewish law, and modern political thought, even as it critiques and transforms them. It must also confront its own history, acknowledging both its contributions and its failures.

The result is a field marked by paradox. Christian ethics affirms that human actions matter—that we are responsible for how we live—while also insisting that our ultimate good cannot be achieved by our own efforts alone. It participates in ethical reasoning while resisting any account that would make ethics self-sufficient. It is, in a sense, both for and against ethics: for it, because human life requires moral formation; against it, because ethics without grace cannot reach its true end.

The task, then, is not to resolve this tension prematurely, but to understand it. Only by tracing the sources, history, and transformations of Christian ethics can we see how these seemingly opposed elements—autonomy and dependence, nature and grace, reason and revelation—might coexist within a coherent, if uneasy, whole.

Chapter 1 — The sources of Christian ethics

Christian ethics does not arise from a single source but from a convergence of traditions, narratives, and practices. To understand its structure, one must begin not with a system of rules but with the layered inheritance that shapes it: Greek philosophical ethics, Jewish law and communal life, and the distinctively Christian claim that God's grace transforms human action. The tension among these sources is not accidental; it constitutes the very fabric of Christian ethics.

The first major source is the Greek philosophical tradition, especially as articulated by Aristotle. His account of ethics is teleological: all things act toward an end (telos), and human beings are no exception. That end is eudaimonia, often translated as happiness or flourishing, which gives coherence to all moral action. Without such an end, human life would lack direction. Ethics, therefore, is the disciplined pursuit of this end through the cultivation of virtue.

Virtues, in Aristotle's framework, are not arbitrary qualities but dispositions that order our desires rightly. They are often described as means between extremes—courage between cowardice and rashness, temperance between self-indulgence and insensibility. This "mean" is not a compromise but a proper ordering of desire. Ethical life begins with

human nature as it is, with its inclinations and capacities, and seeks to transform it into what it should be. Laws and moral commands are intelligible because they guide this transformation toward the good.

Alongside virtue ethics, the ancient world also developed the idea of natural law. While societies have their own customs and enacted laws (positive laws), natural law refers to a more fundamental order embedded in the structure of reality itself. The Stoics, in particular, emphasized living in accordance with this universal law, which remains stable despite external circumstances. This concept would become crucial for later Christian thinkers, who adapted it to articulate a moral order grounded in divine creation rather than mere human convention.

Christianity inherits these Greek categories but does not simply adopt them. It reinterprets them in light of its own narrative and theological commitments. The most significant transformation occurs in the understanding of the human end. For Aristotle, the highest good is achieved within the limits of human nature; for Christianity, the ultimate end is participation in the life of God. This redefinition alters the meaning of virtue itself.

Thomas Aquinas provides a decisive articulation of this transformation. Drawing on Aristotle, he distinguishes between acquired virtues—those developed through human effort—and infused virtues—those given by God. While acquired virtues can order human life in a limited sense, they cannot direct us toward our true end, which is friendship with God. Only the infused virtues, along with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the beatitudes, can accomplish this. Thus, what counts as a "virtue" in the fullest sense is redefined. Human effort remains necessary, but it is no longer sufficient; it must cooperate with divine grace.

This introduces a distinctive feature of Christian ethics: it is fundamentally participatory. Ethical life is not merely about achieving a goal through disciplined practice, but about receiving and responding to a gift. The emphasis shifts from self-sufficiency to dependence, from achievement to grace. This does not negate human action, but reconfigures it. The will must cooperate with grace, even though grace precedes and enables that cooperation.

If Greek philosophy provides one major source, Judaism provides another, more intimate one. Christian ethics is deeply rooted in the biblical narrative, especially in the formation of the Jewish people. The call of Abraham and Sarah, the giving of the Torah, and the establishment of Israel as a people set apart are not merely historical events; they constitute a "social project" through which God's purposes for humanity are enacted.

The Torah, including the Ten Commandments, functions not simply as a set of rules but as a way of life that orders a community. It shapes practices, institutions, and relationships, forming a people whose life together reflects God's will. The Temple, as the meeting place of heaven and earth, symbolizes the integration of divine and human realities. Ethics, in this context, is inseparable from communal identity and worship.

This communal dimension continues in the Christian understanding of the Church. The Church is not merely a collection of individuals who share beliefs, but a social body that embodies a distinctive way of life. Christian ethics, therefore, is not primarily an abstract system but a lived practice within a community shaped by Scripture, sacrament, and tradition. It is through participation in this community that individuals are formed ethically.

This emphasis on community also shapes how Christian ethics relates to law. While natural law remains important, it is not sufficient on its own. Early Christian thinkers such as Origen argued that when human laws contradict the divine law, they must be resisted—even at great personal cost. The authority of law is thus relativized by a higher moral order grounded in God. This introduces a critical stance toward political and social structures, one that has persisted throughout Christian history.

At the same time, Christian ethics does not reject the insights of natural law or virtue ethics. Instead, it incorporates them into a broader framework. The virtues are retained but transformed; natural law is affirmed but subordinated to divine revelation. This synthesis allows Christian ethics to engage with non-Christian traditions while maintaining its distinctive identity.

The interplay between these sources generates a dynamic and sometimes unstable ethical framework. On one hand, there is continuity with ancient philosophy: the emphasis on virtue, the role of reason, and the idea of a natural order. On the other hand, there is a radical discontinuity: the introduction of grace, the redefinition of the human end, and the centrality of a particular historical narrative.

This tension is not merely theoretical; it shapes practical ethical questions. For example, if the good life requires divine grace, what can be said about those outside the Christian community? Can they live ethically? Christian tradition has often answered affirmatively, acknowledging that non-Christians can act virtuously and participate in the good. Yet it also insists that such virtue is incomplete without grace. Ethics, therefore, is both universal and particular: universal in that all humans are capable of moral action, particular in that its fullest realization depends on participation in the life of God.

Another implication concerns the role of commands and laws. In a purely Aristotelian framework, laws are intelligible because they direct us toward our natural end. In a Christian framework, laws also serve to orient us toward a supernatural end that we could not otherwise know. They are not merely rational guidelines but revelations of divine will. This gives them a different kind of authority, one that cannot be reduced to human reasoning alone.

The notion of "hallowing"—making holy—emerges as a key concept in understanding this ethical vision. Ethical action is not simply about achieving desirable outcomes or maintaining social order; it is about participating in the sanctification of creation. To act ethically is, in some sense, to align oneself with God's purposes, to make God's name holy in the world.

In this light, Christian ethics can be seen as a response to a calling rather than a problem to be solved. It is rooted in a narrative that begins with creation and continues through covenant, incarnation, and redemption. This narrative provides the context in which ethical questions are posed and answered. Without it, the concepts of virtue, law, and the good lose their full meaning.

What emerges from this chapter is not a single, unified theory but a complex synthesis. Christian ethics draws on Greek philosophy, Jewish law, and its own theological claims, integrating them into a framework that is both continuous with and distinct from its sources. It affirms the importance of human reason and moral effort while insisting on the necessity of divine grace. It situates ethics within a community and a story, rather than isolating it as an abstract discipline.

This complexity is not a weakness but a defining feature. Christian ethics resists reduction to any one of its sources. It cannot be fully understood as virtue ethics, natural law, or divine command theory, even though it incorporates elements of all three. Its coherence lies not in conceptual simplicity but in the interplay of its diverse origins.

To grasp Christian ethics, therefore, is to hold together these tensions: nature and grace, reason and revelation, individual and community, universal and particular. These tensions will continue to unfold in the subsequent chapters, as the tradition develops through history and confronts the challenges of modernity.

Chapter 2 — The history of Christian ethics

The history of Christian ethics is not a linear progression toward clarity or consensus, but a series of transformations shaped by changing theological, social, and political

conditions. Across its development, Christian ethics has repeatedly reinterpreted its sources—Scripture, tradition, philosophy—in response to new contexts. What remains constant is not a fixed system but a set of tensions: between grace and nature, Church and world, divine command and human reasoning.

In its earliest forms, Christian ethics was inseparable from the life of the Church as a distinct community within the Roman Empire. Christians did not initially develop systematic ethical theories; instead, they embodied a way of life grounded in the teachings of Jesus and the practices of the apostolic community. Ethical formation occurred through participation in worship, catechesis, and communal discipline. The Church functioned as a social body that shaped its members' habits, desires, and judgments.

This early ethical life was marked by a strong sense of distinction from surrounding cultures. Christians understood themselves as a people called to live differently—not by forming a separate political order, but by inhabiting existing societies in a distinctive way. As described in early texts such as the Epistle to Diognetus, Christians shared in the ordinary practices of their societies—language, dress, customs—yet lived as "sojourners," oriented toward a different ultimate allegiance. They were simultaneously integrated and alien, participating in civic life while resisting its ultimate claims.

This tension between participation and distinction became a defining feature of Christian ethics. It was not resolved by withdrawal from the world, nor by complete assimilation. Instead, Christians sought to embody a way of life that both engaged and critiqued the societies in which they lived. This required discernment: knowing when to conform and when to resist.

As Christianity moved from a persecuted minority to an established religion within the Roman Empire, this tension took new forms. The alliance between Church and state introduced both opportunities and dangers. On one hand, Christian ethics could now shape political and social institutions. On the other, the Church risked compromising its distinctiveness by aligning too closely with political power.

One recurring temptation in this period was what later came to be called "Caesaropapism"—the identification of political authority with divine authority. When rulers were treated as if they embodied God's will, the Church's critical stance toward power was weakened. Conversely, Church leaders themselves could assume forms of authority more akin to political rulers than to ministers of Christ. These developments illustrate how the institutionalization of Christianity introduced new ethical challenges, particularly concerning the use and abuse of power.

The medieval period saw a more systematic integration of Christian theology with philosophical ethics, particularly through figures such as Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine emphasized the role of divine grace and the disorder of human desires, arguing that true virtue is impossible without God's transformative action. Human beings, left to their own devices, are incapable of rightly ordering their loves. Ethics, therefore, must be grounded in the reorientation of desire toward God.

Aquinas, building on both Augustine and Aristotle, developed a more elaborate synthesis. He affirmed the role of natural law and the capacity of human reason to discern certain moral truths, while also insisting on the necessity of grace for attaining the ultimate end. His distinction between acquired and infused virtues allowed him to incorporate classical philosophy into a Christian framework without reducing one to the other. Ethics became a structured field of inquiry, yet remained oriented toward a theological vision of the good.

Alongside these theological developments, practical forms of moral guidance emerged within the Church. One notable example is the system of penitentials—manuals used by confessors to assign penances for specific sins. These texts provided detailed prescriptions for moral behavior, often quantifying sins and their corresponding acts of repentance. While they offered concrete guidance, they also risked reducing ethics to a system of rules and penalties, detached from broader theological considerations.

The concept of the "seven deadly sins" further illustrates this development. These categories—pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth—served as a framework for understanding moral failure. They were not merely individual acts but dispositions that distorted human desire. By identifying these patterns, Christian ethics sought to diagnose the underlying conditions that lead to sin, rather than merely addressing external behavior.

The Reformation introduced another significant transformation. Reformers such as Martin Luther criticized aspects of medieval ethics, particularly its reliance on Aristotelian virtue theory and its emphasis on human effort. Luther argued that such approaches obscured the centrality of grace and the radical dependence of human beings on God. For him, no amount of moral effort could justify a person before God; justification is a gift received through faith.

This critique did not eliminate ethical concern but reconfigured it. Ethical action became a response to grace rather than a means of attaining it. Good works were not the basis of salvation but its fruit. This shift placed greater emphasis on the internal disposition of faith and the transformative power of divine grace, while also raising questions about the role of law and moral instruction.

In the post-Reformation period, Christian ethics continued to diversify. Different traditions—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—developed distinct approaches, shaped by their theological commitments and institutional structures. Catholic ethics retained a strong emphasis on natural law and the authority of the Church's teaching office. Protestant ethics, lacking a centralized authority, exhibited a wider range of positions, from strict adherence to biblical commands to more flexible, context-sensitive approaches.

Throughout this history, the relationship between Christian ethics and political life remained a central concern. Christians have had to navigate the tension between their identity as members of the Church and their roles within political communities. This has led to diverse positions, ranging from withdrawal from political engagement to active participation in shaping public policy.

The failures of Christian ethics in this domain are significant and cannot be ignored. The Crusades, for example, were justified as "just wars" aimed at reclaiming the Holy Land, yet they often resulted in violence not only against non-Christians but also against fellow Christians. These campaigns reveal how theological concepts can be co-opted to serve political and military ends, distorting their original meaning.

Similarly, the Church's involvement in colonial expansion, the Inquisition, and the defense of social hierarchies such as slavery and patriarchy raises profound ethical questions. These episodes challenge any simplistic identification of Christianity with moral goodness and underscore the need for critical reflection within the tradition.

At the same time, Christian ethics has also provided resources for critique and reform. Figures such as Bartolomé de las Casas defended the rights of indigenous peoples against colonial exploitation, drawing on theological principles to challenge prevailing practices. Movements for social justice, including the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement, have often been inspired by Christian ethical convictions.

This dual legacy—of both failure and reform—highlights a central feature of Christian ethics: its capacity for self-critique. Because it is grounded in a narrative that includes judgment as well as redemption, it contains within itself the resources to recognize and repent of its own distortions.

Another enduring theme in the history of Christian ethics is the question of whether ethical action is possible outside the Christian faith. While the tradition affirms that all humans are capable of moral action, it also maintains that the fullness of the good cannot be achieved without grace. This creates a complex relationship with other ethical systems, one that is neither wholly inclusive nor entirely exclusive.

The historical development of Christian ethics also reveals a shift in its primary social context. In the ancient world, ethics was oriented toward the city; in the medieval period, toward the Church; and in the modern period, increasingly toward the nation-state and the global order. Each of these contexts shapes the questions that ethics must address and the forms it takes.

What emerges from this history is not a unified tradition but a dynamic and contested field. Christian ethics has been shaped by philosophical influences, theological debates, institutional developments, and historical events. It has adapted to new circumstances while retaining certain core commitments, particularly the centrality of grace and the orientation toward a transcendent good.

To study the history of Christian ethics, therefore, is not merely to trace a sequence of ideas but to observe how a tradition negotiates its identity over time. It reveals how ethical concepts are embedded in practices, institutions, and power structures, and how they are continually reinterpreted in light of new challenges.

This historical perspective prepares the way for the next stage of the discussion, where Christian ethics confronts the distinctive conditions of modernity. The assumptions that once undergirded ethical thought—shared beliefs about the good, stable social structures, and the authority of religious institutions—are no longer taken for granted. The question is no longer simply how to live well within a given framework, but whether such a framework can still be sustained at all.

Chapter 3 — Christian ethics in and beyond modernity

The emergence of modernity marks a decisive rupture in the history of ethical thought, and Christian ethics is deeply implicated in this transformation. The shift is not merely a change in doctrines or institutions, but a reconfiguration of the very conditions under which moral reasoning takes place. What had once been grounded in a shared understanding of the good—whether articulated through Greek philosophy or Christian theology—becomes increasingly fragmented, contested, and, in some accounts, entirely absent.

Modern ethics arises in part as a response to the perceived failures of Christian moral authority. The historical record—crusades, inquisitions, religious wars, and complicity in oppression—casts doubt on the claim that Christianity provides a reliable guide to the good. At the same time, the intellectual developments of the early modern period,

including the scientific revolution, undermine the cosmological frameworks that had supported earlier ethical systems. The world is no longer understood as a fixed, hierarchical order oriented toward a final cause; instead, it appears as a dynamic, open-ended system without a single, unifying center.

In this new context, ethics seeks a foundation independent of theology. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill attempt to construct ethical systems that can command universal assent without relying on religious commitments. Kant's deontological ethics grounds morality in the rational capacity of individuals to legislate universal laws for themselves. A maxim is moral only if it can be willed as a universal law applicable to all rational beings. This approach emphasizes duty, autonomy, and the intrinsic worth of persons.

Mill's utilitarianism, by contrast, evaluates actions in terms of their consequences, specifically their contribution to the greatest happiness for the greatest number. While it retains a teleological structure, the telos is no longer a shared, transcendent good but the aggregate satisfaction of individual preferences. Both approaches aim to provide a common ethical framework that transcends particular traditions, enabling cooperation among individuals who do not share a unified worldview.

This project is closely tied to the rise of new social and political forms. For Aristotle, the primary context of ethics was the polis; for Augustine and Aquinas, it was the Church. In modernity, the relevant context shifts to the nation-state and, increasingly, to global economic and political systems. Ethical reasoning becomes oriented toward managing pluralism—how to achieve social order and cooperation among individuals with diverse beliefs and values.

Within this framework, religion is often relegated to the private sphere. It may inform personal convictions, but it cannot serve as a public basis for ethical or political decisions. God, if acknowledged at all, becomes a hypothetical postulate—useful for grounding moral concepts but not necessary for their operation. Ethics thus claims a kind of primacy: it becomes the stable referent by which even theological claims are judged.

This reordering has profound implications. On one hand, it allows for a more inclusive ethical discourse, in which individuals of different religious and philosophical commitments can participate. On the other, it severs ethics from the narrative and communal contexts that had previously given it coherence. Without a shared telos, moral reasoning risks becoming procedural—focused on rules or outcomes rather than on a substantive vision of the good life.

The consequences of this shift are explored through the work of modern political theorists such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Both develop versions of Kantian ethics suited to democratic societies. For Rawls, justice is a principle that individuals can agree upon by abstracting from their particular identities and commitments. Habermas emphasizes the role of communicative rationality, locating reason in the process of dialogue rather than in individual or cosmic structures. In both cases, ethics is grounded in human interaction rather than in any transcendent source.

Yet this modern project is not without its critics. One line of critique argues that by removing any substantive account of the good, modern ethics undermines its own foundations. If there is no shared telos, then ethical norms may lack the authority needed to guide action. This can lead to a form of relativism, in which moral judgments are seen as contingent on individual or cultural preferences.

More radical critiques emerge in the work of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche contends that the attempt to retain morality after the "death of God" is incoherent. Without a transcendent grounding, moral values become human constructions, expressions of will rather than reflections of objective truth. Yet, paradoxically, modern societies cling to these values even as they deny their foundations. Ethics becomes a kind of residual structure, sustained by habit rather than conviction.

This situation gives rise to what the text describes as the promise and the dilemma of modern ethics. The promise lies in the possibility of freeing ethics from dogmatic religious authority and creating a more inclusive, rational framework. The dilemma is that this very freedom may lead to the dissolution of any stable conception of the good. Without such a conception, ethics risks collapsing into nihilism—the sense that life lacks purpose or direction.

Postmodern thought intensifies this critique by challenging the idea that any stable foundation for ethics—whether theological, natural, or rational—can be established. Rather than replacing one foundation with another, postmodern thinkers question the very desire for such foundations. They emphasize the contingency of all claims to truth and the ways in which power operates through ethical and philosophical systems.

In this context, Christian ethics faces a complex set of challenges. It can no longer assume a privileged position within society, nor can it rely on shared metaphysical assumptions. It must articulate its claims in a pluralistic environment where they are one voice among many. At the same time, it must resist the pressure to conform entirely to the norms of modern ethics, which would require it to abandon its distinctive commitments.

One response to this situation is to reassert the importance of particularity. Rather than seeking a universal ethical framework detached from specific traditions, Christian ethics emphasizes its roots in the life of the Church and the narrative of Scripture. It presents itself not as a neutral, universally accessible system, but as a way of life shaped by specific practices and beliefs. This approach challenges the modern assumption that ethics must be independent of religious commitments.

At the same time, Christian ethics must grapple with the diversity of its own internal traditions. The 20th century saw the emergence of different theological approaches that sought to respond to modernity in distinct ways. Liberal Protestantism emphasized the role of culture and historical context, viewing ethical norms as socially constructed and subject to revision. This approach made theology responsive to contemporary concerns but risked dissolving its distinctiveness.

In contrast, Neoscholastic Catholicism emphasized the enduring rationality of natural law and the stability of metaphysical truths. It sought to preserve a clear distinction between faith and reason while maintaining their compatibility. This approach provided a firm foundation but could appear resistant to historical change.

Between these positions, thinkers such as Karl Barth and Henri de Lubac attempted to overcome the dualism between grace and nature, or grace and culture. They argued that ethics cannot be adequately grounded in either nature or culture alone; it must be understood in relation to God's self-revelation. This perspective re-centers Christian ethics on the person of Christ and the transformative power of grace.

The ethical crises of the 20th century—total war, genocide, and unprecedented forms of violence—further complicate the picture. These events challenge the optimism of modern ethics and raise questions about its ability to prevent or address such catastrophes. The promise of Enlightenment rationality appears hollow in the face of these realities.

In response, some theologians and ethicists have sought to recover elements of the Christian tradition that emphasize community, narrative, and practice. Rather than focusing on abstract principles, they highlight the importance of forming virtuous communities that embody alternative ways of life. This approach aligns with earlier Christian understandings of ethics as rooted in the life of the Church.

At the same time, new voices have expanded the scope of Christian ethics by incorporating perspectives from marginalized groups. Issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality have become central to ethical reflection, challenging traditional assumptions and broadening the range of experiences considered relevant. This development reflects

both the influence of modern and postmodern thought and the internal dynamics of the Christian tradition.

The question of whether God is necessary for ethics remains a central issue throughout these debates. Some argue that ethical action is possible without reference to God, while others maintain that without a transcendent grounding, ethics loses its ultimate significance. The text presents a range of positions, from those who see God as a necessary hypothesis to those who regard ethics as independent of, or even opposed to, religious belief.

Christian ethics does not resolve this question by providing a single answer. Instead, it reframes the issue by asking not simply whether God is necessary for ethics, but which God is being invoked and how that God is known. The answer, within the Christian tradition, is not found in abstract speculation but in the concrete life and teachings of Jesus Christ, which serve as the normative standard for ethical reflection.

Thus, Christian ethics in and beyond modernity is characterized by a tension between engagement and resistance. It engages modern ethical theories, political structures, and cultural developments, while also resisting any attempt to reduce ethics to purely human terms. It affirms the importance of rational discourse and social cooperation, but insists that the ultimate good cannot be fully understood or achieved apart from divine grace.

This tension does not admit of a simple resolution. Instead, it defines the ongoing task of Christian ethics: to articulate a vision of the good that is faithful to its tradition while responsive to the challenges of a pluralistic, rapidly changing world.

Chapter 4 — Sex, money, and power: some questions for Christian ethics

Christian ethics reaches its most concrete and contested form when it turns from abstract reflection to the ordinary practices of life. Questions of sex, economic exchange, and the use of power are not peripheral concerns; they are central arenas in which the ethical vision of Christianity is either embodied or contradicted. What distinguishes Christian ethics in these domains is not merely the content of its prescriptions, but the claim that even the most intimate and mundane aspects of life participate in the task of «hallowing»—making God’s name holy in the world.

This orientation immediately sets Christian ethics apart from modern assumptions about autonomy. Modern moral frameworks often treat areas such as sexuality, consumption,

and personal ambition as domains of individual choice, subject to minimal external constraint. Christian ethics, by contrast, insists that these practices are intrinsically moral and theological. They are not neutral spaces in which individuals freely pursue their preferences, but sites where the shape of one's life in relation to God and others is revealed.

Sex

The ethical significance of sex in the Christian tradition is grounded in an understanding of its purpose. Traditionally, three ends have been identified: unity, procreation, and fidelity. These are not independent goods that can be pursued separately, but interrelated dimensions of a single practice. Unity refers to the intimate bond between persons; procreation to the openness to new life; and fidelity to the enduring commitment that sustains both.

In classical Christian teaching, especially within Roman Catholicism, these three ends are inseparable. To isolate one from the others is to distort the meaning of sexual activity. For example, a sexual relationship that seeks unity without openness to procreation, or procreation without fidelity, fails to embody the full ethical significance of sex. This integrated vision underlies the Church's opposition to practices such as artificial contraception and divorce, which are seen as undermining the unity of these ends.

The Orthodox tradition shares many of these assumptions but approaches them with greater flexibility. While historically opposing birth control, it allows for pastoral discernment at the local level and recognizes the possibility of a second marriage under certain conditions, though not without a sense of penitence. This reflects a different balance between ideal norms and practical accommodation.

Protestant traditions, lacking a centralized authority, display a wide range of positions. Historically, many Protestants upheld similar views to those of Catholicism, but in the 20th century significant shifts occurred. Some Protestant ethicists began to prioritize the unitive aspect of sex, treating it as the primary purpose, while regarding procreation as optional. This revisionist perspective allows for a broader range of sexual expressions, including those not oriented toward childbearing.

These divergent positions illustrate a broader issue within Christian ethics: how to relate enduring theological principles to changing social contexts. The traditional integration of unity, procreation, and fidelity reflects a particular understanding of human nature and divine purpose. As cultural attitudes toward sexuality evolve, Christian ethics must decide whether to reaffirm, reinterpret, or revise these principles.

At stake is not only the regulation of sexual behavior but the meaning of human relationships. Sexual ethics, in this framework, is inseparable from questions of commitment, community, and the formation of persons. It challenges the reduction of sex to individual satisfaction or private preference, insisting instead on its role in shaping a shared life.

Money

Economic life presents another domain in which Christian ethics confronts modern assumptions. In contemporary societies, economic exchange is often governed by market logic: individuals pursue their interests, and value is determined by supply and demand. This framework tends to treat economic activity as morally neutral, subject only to minimal constraints such as legality or fairness.

Christian ethics challenges this neutrality by situating economic activity within a broader theological vision. The use of money is not merely a technical matter but a moral and spiritual one. It reflects one's orientation toward goods, one's relation to others, and one's understanding of what constitutes a good life.

Although the text does not develop a full economic theory, it indicates that Christian ethics cannot simply accept the assumptions of the market. The pursuit of profit, the accumulation of wealth, and the structures of economic inequality must be evaluated in light of the demands of justice, charity, and the common good. Economic practices are thus subject to the same ethical scrutiny as other aspects of life.

This perspective often leads to tensions with dominant economic systems. Practices that are considered normal or even necessary within a market framework—such as competition, profit maximization, or unequal distribution of resources—may be called into question. Christian ethics does not provide a single, unified economic model, but it does insist that economic life be oriented toward the flourishing of all, not merely the advantage of some.

The integration of economic ethics with broader theological commitments also raises questions about the relationship between individual responsibility and structural conditions. It is not enough to act justly within an unjust system; the system itself may require transformation. This introduces a political dimension to economic ethics, linking it to questions of power and governance.

Power

The use of power, whether in personal relationships, social institutions, or political structures, is perhaps the most pervasive ethical concern. Power is unavoidable; it is present wherever decisions are made, resources are allocated, or authority is exercised. The question is not whether power should exist, but how it should be used.

Christian ethics approaches power through the example of Jesus, whose life is characterized by a refusal of violence and a redefinition of authority. Rather than exercising power through domination or coercion, Jesus embodies a form of power that is expressed in service, sacrifice, and non-violence. This model challenges conventional understandings of political and social authority.

This does not mean that all uses of force are categorically rejected. Within the Christian tradition, there have been attempts to articulate conditions under which the use of violence may be justified, as in just war theory. However, even these approaches must contend with the tension between the normative example of Christ and the practical demands of political life.

The relationship between the Church and political power is a recurring theme. As noted in earlier chapters, the Church has often struggled with the temptation to align itself with political authorities, sometimes becoming a "chaplain" to the state rather than a critical witness. This alignment can lead to the sacralization of political power, blurring the distinction between divine authority and human governance.

At the same time, complete withdrawal from political engagement is not a viable option. Christian ethics recognizes that social and political institutions play a legitimate role in ordering human life. The challenge is to participate in these structures without compromising the distinctiveness of the Christian vision.

This tension is captured in the biblical narrative of Jesus' trial, where the declaration «we have no king but Caesar» represents a betrayal of the divine kingship. It serves as a warning against the absolutization of political authority and the loss of a higher ethical orientation.

Integrative Perspective

What unites the ethical considerations of sex, money, and power is the refusal to treat any aspect of life as morally neutral. Each domain is understood as a site of formation, where

individuals and communities are shaped in relation to God and one another. Ethical action is not confined to extraordinary situations but is embedded in the routines of daily life.

This integrative approach also underscores the inseparability of personal and communal ethics. Decisions about sexuality, economic behavior, and the use of power are not purely private matters; they have implications for the broader community. Christian ethics, therefore, resists the fragmentation of life into separate spheres governed by different logics. Instead, it seeks a coherence that reflects a unified vision of the good.

At the same time, the diversity of Christian traditions and the complexity of contemporary contexts mean that there is no single, uncontested application of these principles. Disagreements persist, both within and between traditions, about how best to interpret and implement the ethical vision.

These disagreements are not merely obstacles but part of the ongoing process of ethical reflection. They force the tradition to clarify its commitments, to engage with new realities, and to remain attentive to the ways in which its practices may both embody and betray its ideals.

In addressing sex, money, and power, Christian ethics reveals its most demanding aspect: the claim that every dimension of human life is subject to moral evaluation and transformation. It calls for a reordering not only of actions but of desires, relationships, and institutions. This comprehensive scope is what makes Christian ethics both compelling and controversial, as it challenges deeply held assumptions about autonomy, freedom, and the nature of the good life.

Coda

Christian ethics, as it has unfolded across its sources, history, and contemporary questions, resists reduction to a single method, principle, or domain. It is neither simply a theory of moral reasoning nor a set of prescriptive rules. Rather, it is a way of inhabiting the world—one that emerges from a particular narrative, is sustained within a particular community, and is oriented toward a particular end that exceeds the capacities of human nature alone.

At the center of this ethical vision lies a tension that cannot be dissolved without distorting the tradition itself: the tension between nature and grace. On one side stands the affirmation that human beings are capable of ethical action. We possess reason, desire, and the ability to form habits; we can pursue justice, cultivate virtue, and participate in the goods of communal life. This affirmation aligns Christian ethics with broader human traditions, including Greek philosophy and modern moral thought.

On the other side stands an equally strong claim: that these natural capacities are insufficient to attain the true end of human life. That end—communion with God, friendship with the divine—requires a transformation that cannot be achieved by human effort alone. It must be given. Grace does not abolish nature but perfects it, and at times disrupts and reorders it. This dual affirmation creates a distinctive ethical framework in which human action is both necessary and dependent.

This dependence reconfigures the meaning of ethical life. If ethics is understood primarily as the achievement of the good through disciplined effort, then Christian ethics introduces a paradox: the good is something we must strive for, yet cannot secure on our own. Ethical action becomes a response to a gift, a participation in a life that precedes and exceeds us. The language of virtue, law, and duty remains, but it is reframed within a broader economy of grace.

A second tension runs alongside the first: the relation between the Church and the world. Christian ethics is rooted in a community that embodies a particular way of life shaped by Scripture, sacrament, and tradition. This community provides the practices and narratives through which ethical formation occurs. Yet it does not exist in isolation. It is called to live «for the sake of the nations», engaging with broader social, political, and economic realities.

This dual orientation generates both creativity and conflict. The Church must participate in the world without losing its distinctiveness; it must offer a witness that is intelligible to others while remaining faithful to its own commitments. When this balance is lost, two opposite distortions emerge. On one side, the Church may withdraw into sectarian isolation, abandoning its responsibility to engage the world. On the other, it may become assimilated to prevailing cultural and political norms, losing its capacity for critique.

The history of Christian ethics reveals how difficult it is to sustain this balance. Moments of alignment with political power—whether in imperial Christianity, the Crusades, or colonial expansion—demonstrate the dangers of conflating divine and human authority. At the same time, movements of reform and resistance show the tradition’s capacity to recover its critical voice and reassert its commitments.

A third tension concerns the relation between universality and particularity. Modern ethics seeks universal principles that can be affirmed independently of specific traditions. Christian ethics, by contrast, is grounded in a particular story—the narrative of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the ongoing mission of the Church. Its claims are not neutral or universally accessible in the same way as modern moral theories.

Yet this particularity does not entail exclusion. Christian ethics affirms that all human beings are capable of moral action and that truth and goodness can be found beyond the boundaries of the Church. It engages other traditions, learns from them, and recognizes shared concerns. At the same time, it maintains that its own vision of the good is shaped by a revelation that cannot be reduced to general moral principles.

This creates an ongoing tension between dialogue and proclamation. Christian ethics must be able to speak within a pluralistic context, contributing to common ethical discourse, while also bearing witness to a distinctive understanding of the good. It cannot simply translate its claims into neutral terms without losing something essential, nor can it refuse engagement without becoming irrelevant.

These tensions converge most sharply in the conditions of modernity and postmodernity. The decline of a shared metaphysical framework, the privatization of religion, and the rise of diverse ethical theories have altered the landscape in which Christian ethics operates. It can no longer assume that its categories will be widely understood or accepted. It must articulate its vision in a context where competing accounts of the good coexist, often without a common measure.

This situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge lies in maintaining coherence and fidelity in the absence of external support. The opportunity lies in the possibility of a more self-conscious and reflective ethical practice—one that does not rely on cultural dominance but on the integrity of its own witness.

The discussions of sex, money, and power illustrate how these broader tensions play out in concrete terms. In each case, Christian ethics resists the fragmentation of life into separate spheres governed by autonomous logics. It insists that every dimension of human existence is related to the ultimate end and is therefore subject to moral evaluation. This comprehensive scope is demanding, as it calls into question deeply embedded assumptions about autonomy, desire, and the use of resources.

At the same time, the diversity of Christian traditions and the complexity of contemporary life ensure that there will be no single, uncontested application of these principles. Disagreement is not a sign of failure but an inevitable feature of a living tradition. It reflects the ongoing effort to discern how enduring commitments should be interpreted in changing circumstances.

What, then, is the distinctive contribution of Christian ethics? It is not a set of rules that can be easily codified, nor a theory that can be universally applied without remainder. Its contribution lies in its vision of the good as something that is both given and sought, both communal and personal, both particular and open to all. It offers an account of

human life in which ethics is inseparable from worship, from narrative, and from the transformative work of grace.

This vision does not eliminate the tensions it contains. It sustains them. Christian ethics remains, in a precise sense, both for and against ethics: for it, because human action matters and requires formation; against it, because no ethical system, on its own, can bring about the fullness of the good.